

Talking past the (hetero)norm:  
subject affordances and pedagogic  
possibilities from discourse work  
around sexualities and early  
childhood education.

Alex Gunn, School of Education,  
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NZRECE Symposium, December 2005

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The study

*Who and how can early childhood teachers be?*

- How do we know early childhood teachers professional knowledge landscape is heteronormative? i.e., what markers or features tell us that this is so?
- What are the effects of heteronormativity on teachers and teaching in early childhood education?
- Why should the professional knowledge landscape not ascribe to heteronormativity?
- What might some markers of a queered professional knowledge landscape be and how workable do early childhood teachers see these in practice?

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What is the effect of heteronormativity  
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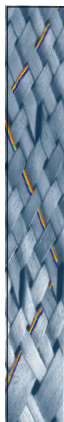
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## Key terms

- Subject / subjectivity
  - A possible self: a concept that “wrenches us kaleidoscopically towards the shifting, fragmented... nature of experience” (Davies, 1997)
- Discourse
  - Conceptual back-cloth upon which our language and actions fall and are drawn from
  - Ways of constituting knowledge together with social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge, and in the relations thereof.
- Heteronormativity
  - Heterosexuality is the proper and dominant form of sexuality: practices in concert with heterosexuality are normal and desirable; heterosexual subjects are proper subjects; heterosexuality is dominant.
  - “the world as straight”

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## Methodological framework

Post-structuralism, language, the other, querying taken-for-grantedness & norms.

- Derrida and deconstruction
  - Reading, writing and the handling of texts
  - Openness to the other and that which we may yet come to know
- Foucault and post-structuralism
  - Language, discourse, power, the body, knowledge, truth
  - Subjects
- Queer theory
  - Identity politics
  - non-normativeness and multiplicity

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## Discursive affordances

Discourse both forms the objects of which it speaks and dispenses subjects to various subject positions. Investigating discourse is not say what it (a discourse) means, rather, to say what made it possible and further, *who* and *what* is possible in what *conditions* within the discursive formation one is trying to make sense of.

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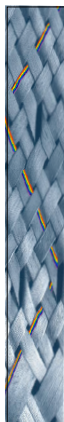
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- If we accept that discourse makes possible the conditions for various subjects, then it is discourse that our inquiries must focus on.
- If discourses make possible heteronormative subjects, then discourse must also procure the conditions for subjects who can work against heteronormativity...

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### So, in this study...

- What makes heteronormativity possible?
- Who are legitimate subjects in this regime? Under what conditions do these subjects become possible / necessary / desirable?

And, what of the *others*' to these?

- What makes anti-heteronormativity possible?
- Who are legitimate subjects in such a regime? Under what conditions do these subjects become possible / necessary / desirable?

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### Post-structural readings of focus group texts

- Focus group interviews with queer teachers, queer allies and teacher educators.
- What is being said, by whom and with what effects?
- What discourses are being mobilised?
- Can the discourses make available subjects that might intervene against heteronormativity?

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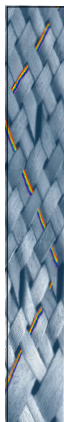
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## Qualification discourses: an example.

- On the one hand participants' spoke of the issues at hand (heteronormativity, heterosexism, homophobia) being outside of their experience - they were naïve, unqualified to speak, learners about heteronormativity, in need of support.
- Yet, at one and the same time participants' comment that heteronormativity was just like thinking about other forms of diversity, e.g., size discrimination, racism & ableism - they were expert, qualified to respond, able to connect themselves and their practices to an anti-discriminatory project...

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Text excerpt one:(F.G 1, QT 1.0, L. 7-10):

7:Ariel: I think that I ah, um (pause) when I first read all of them (pause) I thought, my first thought was well I think I'm pretty lucky because (pause) those all seemed fairly new to me, like ah, that's not something I've come across, those scenarios... yeah, you know (pause) and um (pause) so I guess I just felt well, I didn't know really know what to think I just thought wow (pause) you know that other people do have, do have to deal with that and it's a shame that they do um (pause) but I guess I've always been fairly fortunate to work in environments where (pause) um it's been fairly inclusive and and um I've just never come across (pause) those types of issues or scenarios really (pause).

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Text excerpt two:(FG1, QA 1.2, L.2-3)

2: Alex: o.k. (pause) sorry, um, Stacey

3: Stacey: (laughs) that's fine, I thought, you know to me I thought, well, (pause) I'd never (pause) really thought about it before and I really did I (pause) I wanted, I wanted to think about it and reflect on my own practice (pause) to see if I, (pause) I was making judgements (pause), you know, to other children and (pause), and lots of, I think there's ways to participate fully in it [(pause)] to reflect on my own practices I think.

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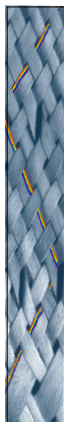
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- Text excerpt three: (FG1, TE 1.1, L.336-338)

336: Pennie: ...and in how many other centres are there out there, people who are um, pretending to be (pause), someone they're not or (inaudible) um and you saying people are invisible like in the classroom are some of our students' invisible to us? And should they be? And should we put them in a position where they feel that they are invisible [(pause)] or are a different person [(pause)] to us and to their classmates? (pause) I don't know ...

337: Dan: [mmm - agreeing]

338: Mina: [mmm]

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On the one hand, we're unqualified, naïve, learners about these issues, in need of support...

- Ariel: ...those all seemed pretty new to me... that's not something I've come across...
- Stacey: ...I'd never really thought about it before...
- Pennie: ...how many other centres?... are our students invisible to us?... I don't know...

Yet at one and the same time...

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Text excerpt four: (FG2, QA, L.16-33)

16: Stacey: ...I can't think if we've got any here, but I've never used one, and it's really unusual too because you think, o.k. we must make sure we've got some of children in wheelchairs and some of children, you know, that are deaf and blind and (pause), yet this is just as you know, big in some peoples lives, that they've got, you know, two mums... when I was training it was making sure you know, you had the books with children in wheelchairs and the children with disabilities... making sure that, you know, the children getting a mul, multiple perspective on things... you know it's acceptable for children to be in a preschool with wheelchairs, or (pause), that are blind... but it's just as acceptable for children to come in with, you know, a parent who's lesbian or gay...

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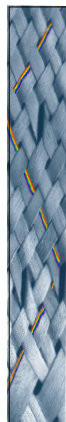
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Text excerpt five: (FG1.1, TE, L.93-105)

93:Rose: I, I think teachers have a, an important role as parent educators and I imagine (pause) I'm hazarding a guess that most teachers would think that was the case.

94: Shirley: we certainly do it, I mean, I mean like it's quite normally done for things like [(inaudible)] get wet at water play...

... 96: Pennie: what you bring in your lunch

97: Shirley: yeah, wellness, health and safety issues

98: Dan: yeah

99: Shirley: yeah

100: Rose: yeah, so you're parent educators in those roles... and teachers wouldn't hesitate to, if a parent said to you well "look I want you to smack my child that's", you know "every time they do this smack them" [(inaudible)]

101: Dan: [oh yeah] ...cont.

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...cont.

102: Rose: ... or ["my baby must be put down to bed with a bottle" ...](pause)]...

103: Pennie: [you're quite clear on that one aren't you?]

104: Dan: [yeah, mmm]

105: Rose: ... we wouldn't hesitate... And some of that's against the regulations and "no we won't smack them because that's against the regulations too" (pause)...

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Text excerpt six: (FG1, QT, L.105-107)

105: Ariel: ...teachers and parents want resources to know how to (pause) deal with it (pause) more; or it might be more that they just want um (pause) it's like, it's like something that you don't know about, like another culture, you know (pause) like I know nothing about (pause) um an Indian culture...

106: Alex: yeah

107: Ariel: ... you know and how they have ah why they wear the clothes that they wear or they have certain um (pause) um (pause) festivals and celebrations and so sometimes if you have a book that can show you that then that, you just feel a little bit more comfortable talking about it to, to the children um and so maybe that's what maybe, more than how do I act, you know, or what do I say.

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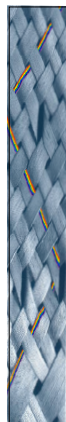
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## We're expert, qualified to respond to inequities, able to connect this anti-discriminatory project...

- Ariel: ...it's like something that you don't know about, like another culture you know...
- Stacey: ...we must make sure...this is just as big... it's just as acceptable...
- Pennie: ...what you bring in your lunch box... you're quite clear on that one aren't you...

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## Discourses of qualification...

On the one hand, we're unqualified, naïve, learners about these issues, in need of support...

- Ariel: ...those all seemed pretty new to me... that's not something I've come across...
- Stacey: ...I'd never really thought about it before...
- Pennie: ...how many other centres?... are our students invisible to us?... I don't know...

Yet at one and the same time, we're expert, qualified to respond to inequities, able to connect this anti-discriminatory project...

- Ariel: ...it's like something that you don't know about, like another culture you know...
- Stacey: ...we must make sure...this is just as big... it's just as acceptable...
- Pennie: ...what you bring in your lunch box... you're quite clear on that one aren't you...

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## So, how useful are such readings for understanding and responding to heteronormativity?

- People make *choices* in relation to discourses - their responses may be constituted anew in each iteration of the discourse. Find the associations & pin down the conditions that people cite when they speak of, in this instance, being qualified... what do these tell you? Can the reach of these things be stretched to include diverse sexualities?...
- We might employ many kinds of tactics in order to engage with discourses: political, complementary, rejection, accommodation or transformation tactics (Hayes, 2004)... purposely look for the "qualification moments" and affirm capabilities... *make ordinary* responses to diversity, including sexual diversity.

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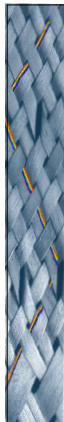
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## How did the deconstruction of these texts afford these findings?

- The identification of discourses and their assertions come clear through careful readings of texts.
- Aside from the qualification discourses I identified discourses of professionalism, of distance, of friendship, of protection and risk, of developmentalism, of childhood innocence, and of silence, the missing and of closetedness.
- The same discourses were operating at different times although for very different effects... the contradictions were points for investigation.

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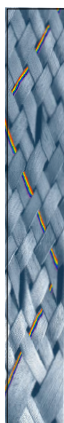
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Because I pin-pointed the ‘negative case’ discourses (those that kept us to the heteronormative status quo - I am unqualified to deal with this form of diversity) as well as some ‘positive case’ discourses (e.g., “I’m qualified to deal with diversity, this is just like dealing with...”), I could take those ideas to participants and ask them to think about alternate discourses in other significant domains (i.e., childhood, parenting, families, boys & girls). This lead us to particular types of work later in the project that wrenched us kaleidoscopically to places and possibilities beyond that which we had previously known.

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## What potential for teacher education?

Make explicit the ways we are implicated in the discourses of our work: particular ways of listening

Locate moments for change at the site of the local: right here, right now we can make a difference to how we talk up our work and ourselves in this process: particular ways of thinking

Be attentive to the discourses imbued in our teacher education work: what do we want new and emerging teachers to hear from us?

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